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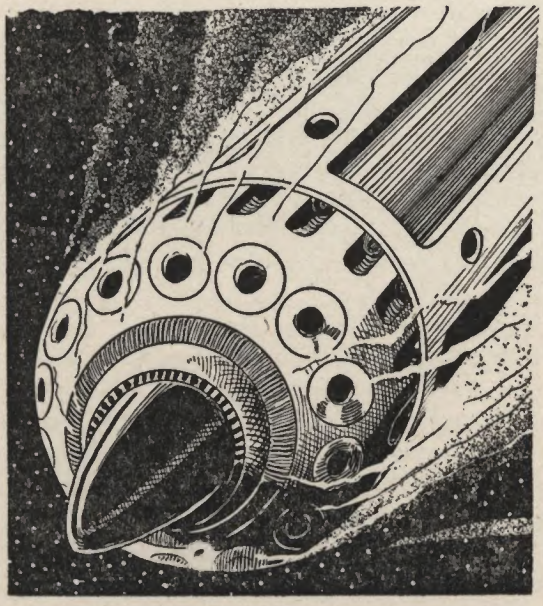
No. 4

THE NEW LIFE

By John Coleridge



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By John Coleridge

"I'M GOING to try it!"

Lips set, chin firm, the girl who had spoken those words pulled hard on the control stick to send the tiny airship upward at a steep angle. Her hand gave the throttle an almost savage tug. Then she swung her eyes backward and down.

The young man beside her also looked for the pursuit they hoped would not be there.

But the girl pilot could not neglect her course and had to tear her eyes to the front. Ahead and above was the Fifth Level, bounded by the air-buoys of striped blue-and-white, between which careened a scattered mass of swift aircraft. A moment later their ship eased into the Fifth Level lane.

"Did he follow?" asked the girl tensely, scanning the lane carefully.

"No. At least we've shaken *him* off. But for Jupiter's sake, Mirna, don't try to run away from the Air Patrol if they signal halt!"

But the girl could see no blue-and-white moth-shaped airship in the lane, and when they passed an air-buoy, no red stop-beam shot to them.

"You see, Lon, we've escaped that too!"

The man said nothing; merely kept a sharp look-out on all sides. He seemed unwilling to admit that they had defied the law and won free.

"Head for Strato-outlet 17," he said presently. "The sooner we get into a strato-lane, the better."

It was accomplished in a few minutes. The girl pilot skilfully wormed the ship to the outside edge of the Fifth Level, shot up into the strato-outlet, and then between the bright red-and-white buoys of the strato-lane. The man had already snapped on the artificial air-control and tripped the cabin-sealing lever. When the air-engine coughed and died, the girl

switched on the rockets. She locked the vanes at dead level, set the blasts at minimum, and sagged limply into the man's arms.

But only for a moment did she display this exhausted reaction to the tenseness of the past hour. She sat up, dashed a suspicion of tears from her eyes, and smiled.

"So, Lon G. Otis, we've foiled the best efforts of my determined father."

"Then it was your father?"

"Certainly, dear; who else? But this is the first time he has set a — a human bloodhound on my trail." Anger flared in her dark eyes.

"And it won't be the last time," supplied the man. "I'm beginning to get discouraged — "

"Lon!" the girl breathed, shocked. "You — discouraged?"

He turned away from her accusing eyes. "It isn't that I don't love you or want you, Mirna. But to have you means defiance of your father, of the law, of the iron-clad social code of today."

"But I am willing to break the code, and even leave my father — for you!"

The man faced her squarely. "Do you know what that means? It means we would have to become fugitives from law — would have to escape from the city. Let's face the truth, Mirna. No city of the civilized world — and that's almost all of it — could be our home; we would be outlaws. We would have to leave civilization and go to some out-of-the-way corner of the world to live a life of hardship, apart from the rest of earth's people. Perhaps you don't quite realize how hard that would be — "

He fell silent. The girl, too, could not speak and turned tear-glistening eyes on the few craft that dashed along the strato-lane.

THEY lived in the 22nd Century, these lovers whose hopes seemed dashed by the sternness of the social code of their time. The inequalities of the 20th Century had gradually grown to a new, and yet old, caste system among the civilized nations. The money-kings and captains of finance of that previous century had molded the future so that by the end of the next century their wealthy progeny had inherited control of government as well as industry. They had become Royalty.

The masses were divided into two classes: brain workers and common laborers.

Not only did the Royal Class of money and power hold the world in its palm, but the original founders had drawn up a social code forbidding marriage between themselves and the two lower classes. Thus they were assured of always having the upper hand. Born in luxury, reared in plenty, living in the purple lap of absolute power, no new and more democratic blood could be instilled to foster a change.

Lon G. Otis was of the second class, a brain-worker; but he used his brain only to the advantage of the Royal Class. That class ordered affairs so that the labors of the masses resulted only in continued power and luxury for the ruling few. He, in common with the majority of his caste, saw the misery of the masses, but was helpless. Yet a disturbing thing had happened to this young engineer. He had seen and fallen in love with a daughter of the upper class. And what was still more calamitous, she had lost her heart to him!

For more than a year these two had been meeting clandestinely to find their mutual love growing instead of passing away. But the girl's father, a true aristocrat in spirit as well as position, had detected the affair. Their exciting chase through forbidden areas between air-lanes had been a result of the father's attempt to break up the secret night meetings by setting a spy on his daughter's trail. They had escaped him by the girl's daring violation of the air-traffic rules, and had been fortunate in not being apprehended by the strict Air Patrol.

But now a dark future faced them, for both knew the father would resort to more direct methods once he had learned Lon's identity.

Lon, in his middle twenties, was tall and broad-shouldered. Quick, direct blue eyes in a frank, open face belied the depth of his character. In an earlier age, his qualities would have quickly carved out for him a brilliant career. Here in this restricted age he could not rise higher than he had already reached. He was a willing worker, but there were times when his deepest thoughts seethed with revolt against the iron tyranny of the upper class.

THE GIRL beside him was radiantly beautiful and not merely through the use of cosmetics. Her surname of Haverton ranked high in the Royal Class. By nature she was spirited;

daring shone from her large brown eyes; vivacity danced in her lithe body.

But tonight she was greatly troubled. Up until this time the hazards of secretly meeting the man she loved had thrilled her rather than bothered her. Now, faced with the gravity of their situation by Lon's frank speech, she felt the first signs of an oncoming dark cloud that threatened to blot out their future.

"I'm thinking of you more than anything," said Lon, breaking a long silence. "You would never be happy away from civilization."

"With *you* I could!" cried the girl defiantly. "Any life with you would be better than life here in a city without you."

Lon shook his head.

"It would!" persisted the girl, yet her voice faltered. She was of an intelligence capable of seeing the truth of his words. "We can easily get away from civilization in this very ship."

"Don't go on," said Lon, putting a finger to her lips. "Anyway, what use for us to follow that course when life on earth will be wiped out in a decade or less!"

Mirna gasped. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. Civilization and human life — all life — are doomed!"

Mirna showed her bewilderment. Lon went on, suddenly facing her and raising his voice. "What do you suppose the changes in normal weather in the past three years have meant? Your people, the aristocrats, refuse to credit it, but the earth is due for a terrible ice-age. An ice-age is a destructive thing. Each previous one wiped out all signs of then-existing civilizations.

"The aristocrats are secure in their life of power and luxury," he continued bitterly, "but they have no scientists among their ranks to tell them the truth and they disbelieve the scientists of my caste."

"Lon, is it really true?" asked the girl. "Couldn't your scientists be wrong?"

"Hardly. What has been discredited by the aristocrats has been accepted in my caste now for many months. There are even some who feel glad that royalty, too, must die with us. Even I sometimes feel that way. It almost seems as if the God of all things had put a finger to end the tyranny that is called civilization today."

He put a hand on the girl's arm. "I have avoided saying these things to you, Mirna, because I didn't want to hurt you.

My people and the poor slaves of the lower caste have always hated your people. That is why the masses have taken the news of earth's doom so dispassionately. They feel almost glad—"

"Oh, Lon!" sobbed the girl. "Wretched as conditions have been in the past century, still it is worse to think of that doom over our heads. Isn't there anythinig can be done?"

"I'm afraid not, Mirna; it's inescapable."

They talked of other things then, small things, but their conversation had no spirit. Mirna finally turned the ship about to return to the city. When she had landed at a transport field, she turned to the man.

"Then, Lon, if life is to be so short, let us have our love till the end. Don't worry"—she went on as he opened his mouth—"about my father. I'll contrive to escape his watchful eye somehow, and pick you up here on our regular nights together."

She gently pushed him from the cabin, revved the motor and roared away toward the center of the city where the nobility dwelled. Lon turned dejectedly from the field. Despite her loyalty to him, and her buoyancy, he felt that soon their bubble of happiness would burst. Her father would step in soon and end it, beyond the power of either of them to prevent it.

CHAPTER II

Trailed by Spies

MIRNA landed the ship in her father's private field, turned it over to attendants, and entered the Haverton living quarters. They were the epitome of magnificence and luxury. Soft lights spread a gentle glow over small tinkling fountains, carven ornaments, vases of perfumed flowers and beautiful furniture. But she passed this without a pause. She had known nothing different all her life.

At the door to her chambers she met her father. Stern, arrogantly molded features with an overtone of ruthlessness were his heritage from those Haverton ancestors who had reaped a mighty fortune and come to control all aircraft. He was tall and thin. Cold blue eyes peered from beneath the

drawn-together emphasis marks that were his bushy eyebrows.

"Mirna!"

The girl, first faint, drew herself up and stared back defiantly at his heavy frown. "Yes, father?" she said.

"This is the first time I've mentioned it, but it has come to my notice that you are engaged in some clandestine affair with a man of the middle class. Is it true?"

The girl flung up her head without answering.

"You bring disgrace on our honored name," went on the father coldly. "Your mother is fortunate to be in her grave, unknowing of this. You must be insane to betray your class pride. But I shall put an end to it. From now on consider yourself under restraint. I have a guard who will stand before your door and inform me when you wish to leave your rooms. Furthermore, you will no longer be allowed the use of our family aircraft. You have proven yourself untrustworthy, going to the extent of violating traffic rules to escape the person sent by me to catch the culprit who is disgracing our name. Who is that man?"

Mirna pressed her lips tight.

"You will not tell. But I shall find out in other ways. When I do, he will be punished and put in such a position that he can no longer intrude on royal decency."

Mirna trembled suddenly. But quietly she said, "You will kill your own daughter if you have him put to death."

Haverton opened his eyes wide. "You little fool!"

"Not me — *you!*" screamed the girl, losing control. "I love him; you can't change that. Nor can you end our affair, for the coming doom of earth will soon shake loose all moral codes!"

"Doom of earth! Has that vile, low-caste lover of yours filled your mind with the mad hopes of the ignorant masses?"

"I'd believe him sooner than you," cried the girl. "And I'm glad — glad, too, as they are, that it must all end — "

"Girl, you are mad!" hissed the angered aristocrat.

Mirna, laughing hysterically, dashed through the doorway into her room and slammed the door. Haverton, his face dark with suppressed anger, made a step as if to follow her, but instead wheeled and strode away.

The doom of the earth that Lon had told the girl about, despite the disregard of the luxury-lulled nobility, was actually in progress. Three years before, the climate of earth had suffered great change. Winters had become severer, summers

cooler. Gigantic storms in the tropics had arisen, never before equalled in destruction. Tidal waves of vast proportions had inundated all coasts.

THE SCIENTISTS, all middle-class workers, had quickly investigated the cause. The alarming truth came out that earth had somehow slipped from its prescribed orbit and was drawing away from the sun. In a year's time it was noticed that the axis was also shifting, so that in time the tropics and polar regions would exchange places.

The astronomers at the same time noticed that all the planets and even the satellites were also changing orbits and shifting axes. They announced that the age-old balance of the solar system had been strangely disturbed, and that if continued, would result in complete collapse. But long before the ultimate end, the human race on earth would die from the havoc of the ice-age that would result.

In characteristic mental laxity of degenerate nobility, the upper class refused to credit the dismal predictions of the earnest scientists, saying it was a plot to disorganize civilization. They could not, however, refute the evidence of weather change. This they optimistically prophesied would soon halt. As proof of their contention, they brought up the old theory of ice-ages. This old rule stated no ice-age was due for another fifteen or twenty thousand years. So the scientists were scoffed down.

It was the second day after his wild ride with Mirna that Lon found his premonition confirmed — the premonition that his love affair with her could not go on much longer. That day he had been annoyed to find himself watched by a hawk-faced man. Ostensibly on a tour of inspection, the man had hovered around Lon as he worked in his electrical laboratory, saying nothing. In the evening his predatory face had gleamed momentarily from a patrol-car window, watching Lon climb the steps to the small apartment which was his home.

A spy on his trail! Lon had no doubt as to who had given the man orders. The thing he had long feared, but which he and Mirna had avoided by careful planning for a year, was now happening. It would be only a question of days and then he and Mirna would be forced apart for ever.

The next day he was shown that the separation was already in force. An official call came for him in the afternoon, order-

ing him to report to the divisional police station. Here he was booked as a suspicious character, and informed that he would be under surveillance till he acquitted himself of the charge. Crime and treasonable plotting were not allowed to gain headway in that time. A complex spy system had been organized by the Royal Class to prevent organization among the two lower classes.

Highly indignant, but helpless to resist, Lon was forced to bear the ignominy of this charge. Then, before he was allowed to depart, he was conducted to a private office. His heart sank as he faced a man in the scarlet and black of the Espionage—an organization as powerful as that of the police. Had they found out everything? He squared his shoulders defiantly, though, as the officer bored him with sharp and accusing eyes.

"What is the meaning of all this?" demanded Lon, showing a bravery of spirit he did not feel. "Why have I been charged as under suspicion, to be spied upon by your men? I am not a revolutionist, nor have I plotted against the government in any way."

"You are trying to act the part of not knowing why you have been put under official suspicion," returned the officer suavely. "Yet you *do* know."

"I do not," said Lon flatly.

"Then I will tell you." The spy-chief grinned maliciously. "I am not permitted to name the lady, but you have been meeting her unlawfully, quite regularly, and for some length of time. She is of the Royalty. Her father, lenient and noble-spirited, will not order your arrest and punishment as matters stand now. In fact"—the officer leaned forward—"if you were to admit your part in this affair and promised to never again see the lady, you would be relieved at once of espionage. This message came from the father of the lady in question. There is your chance, my young friend."

Lon saw the trap immediately. They were not sure he was the right man yet. If he were to confess his misdemeanor, and though he promised to discontinue the affair, he would that quickly be arrested. His punishment under the law would then be demotion to the laboring caste!

Lon clenched his fists, a purple anger flooding him. How evil was the system under which they lived! And how he hated the leering man before him, whose uniform marked him as a hard-hearted minion of the upper class tyrants.

Conquering a desire to leap at the officer and choke him, Lon turned to the door. But he paused and turned suddenly.

"I have nothing to confess," he said evenly. "As for your vermin spies on my trail, I have nothing to fear from them."

Lon grinned to see the leer turn to an angry scowl on the officer's face. Then he left. As he flung out of the building he was promising himself that he would beat to a pulp the first spy on his trail. Yet he knew, even in his helpless anger and dismay, that he could do no such thing without the gravest of consequences.

Spies dogging his footsteps! Could he risk going to meet Mirna at the airport? Tomorrow night was their prearranged time. Yes, by the stars, he would risk it, if only not to disappoint her. Perhaps he could give his followers the slip like Mirna had done up in the air-traffic.

CHAPTER III

Battle in the Blue

"THEN IT is inevitable?" asked Lon of his scientist friend. The other nodded. "The orbital expansion of the earth has ceased. But the seed of destruction will grow. The shifting of the axis and the increased distance from the sun will precipitate a super-rapid ice-age. Former ice-ages took thousands of years to come about. This one will be upon us in a short ten or twelve years."

"Can nothing be done to save even a small part of the human race?"

"We are trying, we scientists. Two things are possible: either burrowing into the earth and living in artificial caverns till the ice-age leaves, or departing from the earth altogether. The first is a hazardous undertaking, and the time is far too short. We do not know how long the ice-age will last but it will probably be hundreds of years. Even present-day science quails at the thought of such a gigantic task as making a self-contained home in the bowels of the earth. As to the second possibility, the men who could most help are gone."

Lon looked up curiously. "You mean those hundred scientists who disappeared nine years ago?"

The other nodded. "They, curiously enough, represented the flower of science, especially the science of rockets."

"And nobody knows where they went?"

"No one. They left in absolute secrecy. No doubt they are in some odd corner of earth, living life as they wish. You know, of course, that it was the tyranny of the aristocrats that drove them away."

Lon pondered a moment. "Isn't it possible that they foresaw the coming doom and left civilization for the express purpose of preparing for it?"

"Very possible," agreed the scientist. "We all know how assiduously the aristocrats searched for them, thinking they had left in order to prepare a revolt campaign against their rule. Why, for five years the Air Patrol, a special corps of them, scoured the entire earth. The united nations of Europe, Asia and Africa joined the western world in the quest. Yet never a sign of those hundred was found. It is most baffling."

Lon shrugged. "The nobility still disregards the threat of doom?"

"Yes. When it was reported that the earth had finally ceased to wander away from the sun, the Royal Class immediately took that as absolute assurance that all would be well. Lon, it is remarkable how narrow-minded they have become! It seems that the two centuries of their luxurious rule has degenerated their minds to the extent that they can no longer reason, or listen to reasoning."

"They will die too," supplied Lon without feeling. "What matter whether they realize it or not? They are as powerless as we."

He left the scientist then and wandered out into the prim, plain streets that composed the portion of the city in which lived the middle class. He wandered through almost deserted avenues, apparently without aim. This was the evening he was to meet Mirna at a certain transport field. Yet he must first shake off the spy or spies he knew must be on his trail.

LON resorted to tactics he had learned in his earlier years while a member of a secret revolutionist group which had been later broken up by the Espionage. Boarding an elevated train that took him to the amusement center of the city, he transferred to a local car that stopped at every loading platform. Such was the cleverness of the men on his trail, that he did not know where they were, or who they might be among the crowds pressing close to him.

As the local train began to make its stops in the most crowded sections of this part of the city, Lon put his method into practice. Pulling his hat low he got off at a particularly crowded platform, in the center of a milling group of people. Then he casually pushed his way into the same train, but on the next car. He mingled with a group ready to get off at the next stop. When the train ground to a halt again, he repeated his maneuver. He did this five times. And in all that time he had been squeezed tightly in the crowds, with new faces constantly pushing to the front.

Sure now that he had shaken his trailers, and laughing to himself at the ease of it, he boarded a train that would take him to his destination. But all his trouble had been for nothing. Arriving at the air-field, he did not find Mirna, nor did she show up in the next two hours.

"Something has happened," he muttered. "Her father not only put spies on my trail, but must have prevented her coming. I guess that puts finis to everything for us."

He left the air-field despondently. After walking till long after midnight, in a black mood of depression, he suddenly told himself he was not beaten yet. He would do the one thing left — go to her, since she could not come to him. He knew it was dangerous — the law was strict with underclass trespassers in the patrician section — but he would try it.

The aristocratic section of the city was the hub. Surrounding it completely and seperating it from the circle of middle-class dwellings was a high stone wall. As the aircraft and all weapons were in sole possession of the ruling class, this wall was a sufficient barrier to mobs and rioters. But a lone man could clamber up in places where the stone had crumbled to allow a foothold.

Carefully, from the top of the wall, Lon surveyed the scene at his eyes' command. It was like looking from a jungle to an Eden. On one side of the wall was the drabness of unadorned middle-class dwellings — on the other a vast expanse of park and garden, shimmering softly in the full moon. In the dim distance he could see the vague outlines of the nearest of the palatial homes of the aristocrats, some of them veritable castles.

It brought a numb ache to his heart, it was so beautiful. But it brought burning bitterness, too. He, and millions like him, must live in plain surroundings, drab streets, and uncomfortable houses — while these parasites of the ruling class lived in a comparative heaven! And further beyond the middle-

class city was the abomination that made up the miserable homes of the lowest class. They, poor souls, lived in hovels.

Lon shook emotion from him. He must be wary. Seeing no sign of the police who patrolled the patrician city, he dropped to the street level and scurried into the shadows of the trees that lined an avenue. Keeping always in shadow, he walked uncounted miles. He knew exactly where he was going, for several times Mirna had sailed the airship they were in over her home to show him what it was like. He remembered vividly the outlay of homes.

When the Haverton mansion loomed before him, Lon breathed easier. He had escaped the watchful eye of the police, who, in these troublous times, patrolled the Royal City against any possible assassins. No one knew he was here. It should be easy to communicate with Mirna. He followed a line of flowering shrubbery to that part of the mansion that Mirna had once pointed out to him as her suite of rooms.

THERE was a light streaming from oneof the windows. Lon drew in a full breath and prepared to run across the moonflooded lawn between him and the window.

At that moment a light in the sky caught his eye. It was merely a dim glow of green, but it was descending rapidly.

Lon watched. With a suddenness that startled him, a black shape, bearing the green light, dropped out of the sky, glinting somberly in the moonlight. It hovered a moment above the Haverton mansion, then floated lightly as a feather downward, to land on the lawn exactly between Lon and the window.

The watcher passed a hand before his eyes. What hallucination was this? He had never seen such a ship before. Built like the body of a stream-lined airplane though it was, it had no wings! More, it had no propeller and he had heard no engine-noise from it! What amazing ship was this? Where had it come from? and — most important — why was it here?

Lon's thoughts were cut abruptly short by the opening of a sliding octagonal doorway of the strange ship. From it stepped two figures clothed in black, with masks over their features. After glancing around the open lawn — not seeing Lon, who had drawn behind the shrubbery — they approached the window.

Lon, seeing all this, sensed that something decidedly strange

was underfoot. His first thought was to rush out and shout, thus bringing out the Haverton servants and perhaps a near-by policeman. But another thought prompted him to stand still and watch.

The two figures now stood at the window. One of them raised his arm, pointing at the glass, an instrument in his hand. There was no sound, no indication of anything happening, yet the next moment they had both leaped lightly to the sill and clambered into the room. It came to Lon that the glass of the window had been made to vanish completely! Was it robbery or abduction?

He must circumvent this, whatever it was. The fact that they entered a window of Mirna's room boded no good for the girl. Then he noticed with a shock a third masked figure standing beside the ship, ceaselessly looking around. In his hand he held what was plainly a shock-pistol, such as the police carried.

Now Lon was in a quandary. If he rushed out there, unarmed as he was, the guard would use his shock-pistol on him. If he began shouting and raising a clamor from where he stood, no one might hear him, for the buildings were an appreciable distance away. Before he had time to think of a third possibility, the figures again appeared at the window.

Lon needed but a glance to see that one of them carried in his arms a limp, girlish figure that could be only Mirna! With a wild shout, Lon rushed out at them. The masked figures glanced at him, startled. Then with hurried motions they all leaped into their ship. The octagonal door clanged shut in Lon's face, and even as he pounded and clawed at the metal, the ship rose gently. Gathering speed, it raised into the silver blackness of the sky.

Lon, in stunned surprise, watched the alien ship's dark shape melt into the blue-black vault above. But next moment he was running at top speed toward the Haverton airship hangar. His shouting of a minute before had apparently aroused the household, for he saw various figures flying about. One of them, a burly man, lunged at Lon, apparently thinking him the cause of the whole thing. Lon avoided him easily and raced on, glancing upward over his shoulder to see where the wingless ship was. He was able to see the green light it carried. But it grew fainter and smaller steadily as the ship gained altitude.

LON STOPPED before the door of the hangar to find it locked. With a curse of vexation he broke a small statuette off its base and flung it through a nearby window. Then he scrambled in and ran quickly up to the ship that Mirna always used, and which she had taught him how to fly. He started the motor, knowing that the roof opened automatically when the noise beat on its audio-sensitive lock. Then he pulled at the controls.

Like an agile insect, the tiny airplane leaped upward and into the night sky. Lon could see below many figures looking up at him, waving their arms and shouting. Even Haverton himself was there, shaking a fist. But Lon had no time to conjecture what they thought of him for so high-handedly confiscating a Royal ship. He turned his eyes upward.

He could see nothing of the ship. But he knew it had gone straight up, at least till it had become invisible. Anyway, upward was the best bet, and upward he went as fast as the motor could manage. He peered steadily ahead, casting a quick glance below and around at times to see if any of the snoopy Air Patrol were chasing him for using high speed at low levels. For long minutes he saw nothing and began to fear that he had lost the trail altogether.

Then suddenly he saw a dim speck of green that grew brighter steadily. It must be the alien ship! At the same time he saw with sinking heart one of the green-and-white moth planes of the Air Patrol zoom up at him from the First Level. which he had passed a moment before. What should he do? What *could* he do?—the Air Patrol had super-fast ships and also weapons. He ground his teeth in rage.

"You won't stop me, you hell-hound!" he shouted uselessly at the inexorably oncoming ship.

With that he turned off the helicopter and brought the front motor to roaring life. Turning nose upward at a sharp angle, he jerked open the throttle. Looking back, he saw the blunt-nosed moth ship fall back momentarily, then loom up again at high speed.

Lon knew the range of their weapons. If he could twist and turn and maneuver enough to keep out of line of the guns, he might win free of them. Then if he could put on a burst of speed and catch up with the alien ship, and put the Air Patrol on its trail...

The next few minutes seemed like a vivid but impossible dream. Lon, using all the skill at his command, made his ship

perform like a mad thing. Loops, twists, wide high-speed curves, anything and everything he could think of he used to baffle the striped moth ship. At first the Air Patrol ship shot to him the red beam, which meant stop. Then, when the miscreant refused to halt and instead attempted to flee, the minions of the law brought their guns into play.

Lon, still manipulating the controls like a demon, felt faint as the livid streaks of trail-fire bullets spun by him, often missing him by mere inches. Then at times the pale violet of a shock-beam swung by so close that he shuddered and shrank back in his seat. It could not last long, he knew. Sooner or later —

He had almost forgotten the alien ship in the excitement of escaping the Air Patrol. Out of the corner of his eyes he suddenly saw it again, so close that he wondered if it had stopped or was coming down. As Lon flashed by the Second Level, hounded by the green-and-white moth ship, another moth ship leaped from an air-buoy landing to aid its sister ship. Now with two after him, Lon knew he had no chance.

He wondered why the alien ship was hovering about. If only the Air Patrol would see it and chase it too. But what if they did, and suppose there were resistance and they were shot down — Mirna, too, would die! Lon was in misery now and heartily wished he had not given chase to the alien ship at all.

He found himself suddenly on the other side of the wingless mystery ship. One of his gyrating swings had carried him there. The two moth ships, widely separated, came up at a furious rate. Evidently they had at last spotted the wingless ship, for one veered toward it, and the other at Lon. Within them were grim-faced Air Patrol men — men whose greed for small luxuries and influence had drowned their gentler emotions. They were the Air Patrol and they were dangerous opponents in this day of harshness and class hatred.

It all happened in a few seconds. The guns of the moth ships spluttered fire-bullets as they zoomed closer to their prey. The alien ship, Lon noticed, had ceased all motion and hung there magically. Suddenly one of the moth ships ceased its gunfire. Then its engine died and the prop stood still. Unpowered, it lost altitude and glided downward, obviously still under the control of the pilot. Then the second moth ship sped to attack this strange enemy and a moment later it, too, became silent and glided earthward.

Quite bewildered, Lon circled his craft around the adamant ship without wings, and tried to think. What marvelous, invincible craft was this which could disarm and unpower the troublesome Air Patrol and send them down like spanked children? And now, what was there left for him to do?

He kept circling above the motionless ship, unable to initiate a new move. He knew now it was within their power to disable him and send him on his way.

And whoever or whatever was in that strange craft — Mirna was in their power! For what purpose he could not guess. A seething frustration at this inexplicable turn of affairs rose in Lon. He was about to recklessly turn his ship and try ramming the other in pure desperation, when the wingless wonder broke from its invisible mooring and swung toward him. Lon was in a daze as it loomed large.

He was about to jerk at the control to shoot away, when a tingling sensation came over his whole body. His nerveless fingers slipped away from the guidestick as a complete paralysis followed the tingling. And something pressed on his brain. A cloud of ink was falling over him, blotting out his sight, numbing his brain...

He slumped to one side of the seat, unconscious.

CHAPTER IV

The Choice

LON AWOKE from blankness to find himself in a small metal chamber whose roof came together over the center of the floor. He sat up in the couch on which he lay and looked around, puzzled. At the peak of the indrawn roof was a light globe. One side of the room was flat, bearing a transparent port-window. The rest of the wall space curved around him in a perfect arc. At one indented spot was a tiny, curtain-concealed lavatory.

Standing on unsteady feet, he dashed to the port and looked out. It was broad daylight, yet the stars shone dimly and the sky was a deep blue-black. Lon knew immediately that he was in the upper reaches of the stratosphere, perhaps 20 or more miles above ground. He and Mirna had been this high several times before in their numerous trips in her tiny ship.

Lon tried to see more of the ship he was in by pressing his face against the port glass, and succeeded in glimpsing the bulging walls of metal on either side. But the size of it astounded him. If the whole ship was built in like proportion, it must be capable of holding at least a hundred passengers! In that bulge of wall he could see rows of ports exactly like his.

What was this all about? How had he come here? What had happened after he went senseless in his ship while hanging above the wingless ship? And who were these people?

Lon paced the narrow confines of his prison cell in a whirl of thought. But he could make nothing of it. He examined the walls of his room for possible escape. There was just one door, tight shut, and no means of opening it from the inside.

Realizing the security of his prison, Lon stepped again to the port-window. Sunlight glinted brightly on the metal walls. He turned his eyes again to those ports within his range of vision. If these were a series of tiny prisons, he should see faces at those other ports. Suddenly he involuntarily cried aloud. Mirna's face peered out of the third port from him! Almost at the same moment she saw him. Surprise, bewilderment, then joy came over her face. Then she disappeared.

Lon heard the door open, and gasped aloud as Mirna came running in and threw herself into his arms. After a while Lon held her at arm's length.

"Quick, Mirna. You must know more about this than I. You opened my door. Can we escape somehow?"

The girl shook her head. "I'm afraid not. I can open any door in this corridor from the outside. But I can't—and none of us can—open the door at the end of the corridor, which leads to the air-lock."

"None of you?" queried Lon. "How many of you are there?"

Mirna looked at him queerly. "Lon, there are over a hundred rooms and right now most of them are occupied—each by a woman!"

WHOLESALE abduction, like in the wild days two centuries ago, thought Lon. Could it be for the purpose of a tremendous ransom? Or, since they were all women, was it some other, more gigantic, scheme? But who or what could be behind this?

"What do the other women know about all this?" asked Lon.

"Not much more than I do," answered the girl. "Except that some who've been here a few days say they are treated with utmost respect and decency. The only men they've seen are a few of those masked men."

Though restless to do something, Lon had to pause to think.

"In the hands of mysterious masked men," he said at last, "who have a miraculous wingless ship and also this huge oversize air-buoy, fitted out as a liner. What in the universe can the whole thing mean? Here we're prisoners. Back in the city we would be separated. For the life of me, I can't figure out whether we're worse or better off than before!"

"It's all about the same to me," said Mirna in weary tones. "Father had kept me a prisoner in our home for a week. And here I'm a prisoner, too." Then her tone became lighter. "But at least here you and I—"

Lon interrupted. "Mirna, I want to see the door at the end of the corridor. Nobody's going to keep me a prisoner if I can help it. Come on."

The corridor proved deserted. As they passed a small cross-corridor, Lon paused to question the girl about it.

"Those of the women who aren't in their rooms," whispered Mirna, are in a general lounge at the end of that corridor. I was in there this morning. It's a beautiful and comfortable room. Those masked men seem to have planned everything elaborately, whatever their plans are."

They passed dozens of doors on either side. Lon's room had been at the extreme end, where the coorridor ended abruptly in blank wall. At the other end was the door that led to other parts of the huge ship.

They reached the door and Lon grasped the handle, to find it locked. He looked his disappointment. But suddenly the handle turned from the other side and the door swung open. Lon lunged at the masked figure that appeared and clipped him on the jaw with a hard fist. The masked man staggered back, then raised a shout that was chopped off by another hard blow from Lon's fist. A quick, powerful jab to his heart floored the masked man.

"Quick, Mirna, follow me!"

He jumped through the door to run into the arms of three more masked men. Without a word Lon brought his powerful shoulders into play, knocking one masked man against the

wall with a thud. He turned on the second and jabbed a half-dozen quick blows to face and chest, sending him reeling.

The last masked man had taken a step backward and raised his arm. Lon cursed at the same time that he sank unconscious beneath the shock-pistol aimed at him.

When he came to, he found himself in the same little room in which he had first awakened some hours before. He tried the door despondently — it was locked.

Wondering if they were going to starve him to death, Lon peered out the port-window for a chance glimpse of Mirna at her window. But there was no face there, even though he went back time and again.

It was just as Lon was calculating the effect of the couch-frame against the port-window, that the door suddenly opened. A masked man stepped in. In one hand he held a shock-pistol. Lon grinned as he saw that his chin, which was not covered by the mask, was bruised.

"You will precede me, out into the corridor."

At a wave of the pistol, Lon complied and walked to the further end of the corridor, followed by his guard. Passing through, they went down a larger passageway and from there into a large room. In this room was another masked man — and Mirna! She smiled to him.

LON GAVE her a quick nod, then turned grimly to the masked man seated behind a desk with many buttons and levers on it.

"I would appreciate," he said with ironic politeness, "an explanation of all this, particularly why we've been imprisoned here."

The masked man nodded. "Exactly," he said, his voice friendly. "First of all, you wonder who I and my masked companions are. Do you remember the hundred scientists who left civilization nine years ago, renouncing allegiance to any government on earth?"

Lon and Mirna stared at him in amazement, too shocked to speak.

"Yes, we aboard this ship are of that hundred," continued the masked man. "We foresaw the coming ice-age nine years ago. Our instruments detected the dark, invisible star which approached the solar system, and which was to distort the orbits of the planets by its giant gravity, pulling them partly

away from the sun. And because civilization was so corrupt, we made no move to warn the rest of the world. Instead, we decided to take steps to preserve our little group and let the mass of humanity come to its inevitable doom without needless forewarning. We could not save them anyway.

"We left, creating such a stir as is already history, and selected a new home, and founded a community of our own. But what good is a state without posterity to inherit it? Accordingly, these women have been abducted — as you may call it — to become the future mothers of our children. In fact, in the larger sense, to carry on the human race!"

Lon had sufficiently recovered from his first surprise to ask: "But just how is your community to escape the ice-age which is going to cover the whole earth with ice and storms in a few more years?"

"Because," smiled the masked man, "our new home and community is not on earth but on the planet Mars! That planet, having no great seas, will suffer little change through the expansion of its orbit. It will harbor life when all earth is covered with a vast sheet of ice. There is air there, thin but highly oxygenated. There is water at the poles, enough for human need. And our science will give us food and warmth through the long, bitter period that will follow.

"Of the marvelous inventions and discoveries we made in these last nine years, I will say nothing. This ship is one result of it — a giant space-ship that will take us to Mars as soon as our work here is completed. We will join there the other half of our hundred, who are even now preparing our community-home for the coming of its future mistresses."

Suddenly Lon looked at Mirna and then back at the speaker. "And just how," he asked curiously, "do I fit into the picture?"

The masked man smiled as if in amusement. "Last night," he said, "when you so persistently tried to save this young lady from some fate you couldn't know at the time, you won the admiration of those aboard our air-flyer. Seeing you attacked by the Air Patrol, we descended to help you — drove them away and took you in after rendering you unconscious for purposes of secrecy.

"I will be frank with you. This young woman was intended to be the wife of one of our hundred. But it will be easy enough for us to get another, and let you marry her — that is, if you want each other."

The scientist smiled at the form in which his answer came. They were in each other's arms, asking one another if it could be true. Finally Lon turned again to the other man.

"But how about the Mars question in our case?" he asked.

"You have your choice in that," returned the scientist. "Despite our masks — which we wear because of a figurative vow never to show our faces on earth again, after leaving it because of its tyranny — despite them, we are not lawless in our tactics. We will give all these abducted women free choice to return to their old homes if they so wish. But I rather doubt, all things considered, any one of them will want to return. Anyway, in your case, too, we offer you a safe return to the city, or the New Life on Mars. Which is your choice?"

BUT BEFORE Lon could answer, a buzz sounded in the room and with a word of apology, the scientist tripped a lever on his desk. An excited voice came from the speaker over which was the televised vision of one of the masked men.

"Dr. Johnson!" said the image. "Professor Michel, at the B-6 screen, reports a large fleet of aircraft coming through the ten-mile cloud layer! They are heading straight this way, under rocket power. It must be the Air Patrol!"

The masked Dr. Johnson gave an involuntary gasp. Then he asked: "And our space-motors are not yet repaired?"

"No! It will take a few more hours before the motors are ready for use!"

"Then we must give battle!"

"We must!" repeated the image. "Each of us must get to our detailed ship, as planned, as quickly as possible, and oppose the Air Patrol, if they are bent on battle!"

"Right!" And the scientist snapped off the switch.

He turned to Lon and Mirna with eyes that were burning strangely. "Somehow, we've been discovered, despite our many precautions. The Royal tyrants have sent up their minions, no doubt with orders to kill and destroy. We hoped to avoid this. We are scientists, not military butchers. Unfortunately, our space-motors are under repair, else we would leave. Well, battle it is!"

"But you won't stand a chance!" gasped Lon. "The Air Patrol has hundreds of ships in this city, and you have only —"

"Twelve," supplied the scientist. "But it won't be so unequal as you think. Our twelve ships are invincibly armed,

and heavily armored — in fact, invulnerable. Our big concern will be to destroy the Air Patrol fleet before they think of attacking this vessel. That is our only worry. The best thing for us to do, of course, will be to attack immediately — engage them in the fight which must be victorious for us before they discover this space-ship miles higher."

As the scientist ran past Lon toward the door, Lon grabbed his arm.

"Dr. Johnson," he said. "If you need a spare gunner, lead me to the Air Patrol. I want to do my bit toward earning a place in your community."

And that was his answer to the choice between old Earth and the New Life.

THE END

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